Ofsted's Languages Research Review

MOTIVATION

Motivation has a significant impact on language learning and attitudes towards learning languages. It is important to build learners' self-efficacy (their belief in their own ability) in the language. Factors which build this include experiencing success, understanding the language's phonetic code, having a secure grasp of the language's building blocks, being around non-native peers who can communicate effectively, and being clear about how to make progress.

PILLARS OF PROGRESSION

The three areas of the curriculum which are vital to ensure progress are **phonics, vocabulary** and **grammar**. Whilst pupils will of course learn about all of the cultural aspects of the communities which speak the target language, these three areas underpin the learning which is essential for all of the benefits of language learning to be unlocked. These are the pillars on which all progression in languages are hinged.
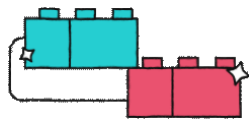
PROGRESSION IN PHONICS

There should be a carefully sequenced plan for the teaching and learning of target language phonics. Pupils should practise this knowledge until it is automatic. Effective teaching includes regular reviewing phonic knowledge and teaching about the differences between English and the target language pronunciation.

PROGRESSION IN VOCABULARY

There is a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading ability. It is estimated that the 2000 most frequent words in a language comprise around 80% of the content of written and spoken language. When leaders select vocabulary, they should choose words which will be the most useful to learners. This means that careful consideration should be given to the lists of vocabulary that pupils will be taught. It is very useful to teach vocabulary that can be used in a number of different grammatical contexts.
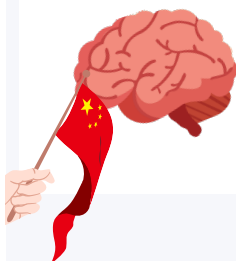
PROGRESSION IN GRAMMAR

Progression in grammar should be planned so that over time, pupils learn increasingly complex structures and concepts. Once pupils have learned a new component of grammar, they need plentiful opportunities for practice so that they can embed it in their long-term memory. Curriculum leaders can use the CEFR as a guide for progression in grammar (There are also some principles which are summarised on the website blog).

CURRICULUM SEQUENCING

In the initial stages of language learning, pupils need to think hard and engage in effortful practice in order to acquire the basics of the language. Knowledge of the basics needs to become automatic before more demanding content is introduced. This really needs to be understood as the difficulties learners might have in recognising single words and producing unfamiliar sounds. However, learners might only progress from this beginner stage after GCSE study.

LIMITS OF WORKING MEMORY

Cognitive load theory is very relevant for language learning, especially in the initial stages. This should be held in mind when designing curriculum sequences and during lessons. The goal of each step of learning should be building proficiency towards automaticity. Overloading working memory inhibits the chances of successful learning.

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LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

In the initial stages of language learning, pupils need to decode what they hear and read. This is an effortful process which is error-prone and slow. Practice over time should enable pupils to become more automatic in this process which in turn means they will be able to apply higher order skills to their reading and listening. It is important for teachers to understand the different demands between listening and reading, notably of listening's speed and need to hold information whilst taking in new information.
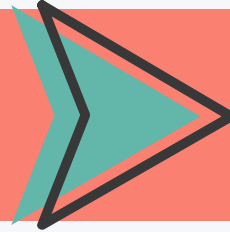
LANGUAGE PRODUCTION

Novice learners produce language which is shorter, slower and likely to contain errors. As with comprehension, sufficient practice leads to automaticity which in turn allows for more sophisticated production as learners can attend to processes such as developing ideas. The key difference between speaking and writing is the 'immediacy' of speaking and its reliance on listening comprehension.

EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION

There is substantial debate between intentional and incidental learning. Whilst some learners can benefit from incidental learning, it is argued that intentional learning is more effective for a greater number of learners. The report concludes that explicit instruction is more effective for beginner learners.

USE OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE

This is a much debated issue. The report suggests that the target language should be used when it reinforces and supports pupil practice in already learned content. It suggests avoiding using the target language when it might act as a hindrance to understanding; for example, explaining new grammatical rules in the target language is unlikely to be the most efficient instructional method.

ERROR CORRECTION

It is important to maintain motivation among language learners when correcting errors and so the classroom environment is really important: pupils need to feel safe to make mistakes. The most efficient and effective way of correcting beginners' mistakes is to prompt learners to identify the mistake so they understand what needs correcting. Error correction is most effective when done immediately.
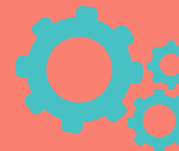
ASSESSMENT

Assessment for and of learning is important for languages. Regular testing is important to practice retrieval of phonic, vocabulary and grammar knowledge, though it is important to design assessments which assess these components properly. For example, vocabulary tests should not allow pupils to infer the meaning of words. Anything that is tested should be aligned to the curriculum content and sequencing, and learners will benefit from being tested on content from previous years.

SCHOOL SYSTEMS

How much leaders prioritise languages is correlated with the success of their implementation and impact. Curriculum time is a challenge for most primaries, and in some secondaries, some children are disapplied from language learning in Year 7 (and in some cases, all of KS3). Schools should pay attention to forging links between primaries and secondaries to have conversations about assessment and curriculum continuity.

STAFFING AND CPD

The quality of teaching is key to addressing the challenges of language learning. This means that schools should consider teacher expertise and CPD. It is crucial to continuously improve teachers' proficiency, expertise and confidence. According to the Languages Trends study, most primary teachers have not received language-specific CPD within the past year.

This is a very condensed summary of the research review conducted by Ofsted into high-quality languages curriculums. I have provided a more detailed summary on my website which explores these themes in more detail, though I would definitely recommend reading the entire review and accessing some of the materials on Ofsted's YouTube channel. All links are on my website.

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